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ABSTRACT

In a study that aimed to distinguish three levels of peer relationship and assess behavior at the three levels, a within-subjects design was used to investigate target preschool children's behavior toward their best friends, associates, and acquaintances in preschool classes. For 6 weeks, 22 target children in 7 classes were observed while they interacted with peers during free play. Comparisons on measures of significant social behaviors revealed that types of relationships were qualitatively distinct. Target children interacted most often wih best friends, and more often with associates than with acquaintances. As level of association increased, self-disclosures increased and disagreements decreased. Fantasy play, a group activity, was engaged in equally often with best friends and associates, but rarely with acquaintances. These results are consistent with the theory that children have a process view of relationships and selectively choose behaviors within the context of preferred relationships that serve to maintain those particular relationships over time. Over 30 references are cited. (Author/RH)

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Preschoolers' Differential Behavior Towards Best Friends, Associates, and Acquaintances

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to distinguish three levels of peer relationships and to assess behavior at these three levels. A within-subjects design was used to compare target children's behavior towards their best friends, associates and acquaintances in preschool classes. Twenty-two target children in seven classes were observed interacting with peers during free-play for 6 weeks. Comparisons on measures of significant social behaviors revealed that types of relationships were qualitatively distinct. Targets interacted most often with their best friends, and more often with associates than with acquaintances. As level of association increased, self-disclosures increased, and disagreements decreased. Fantasy play, a group activity, was engaged in equally often with best friends and associates, but rarely with acquaintances. These results are consistent with the theory that children have a "process view" of relationships, selectively choosing behaviors within the context of preferred relationships that serve to maintain those particular relationships over time.

Preschoolers' Differential Behavior Towards Best Friends, Associates, and Acquaintances

Early relationships play a significant role in social, emotional and cognitive development (Asher, Renshaw, & Geraci, 1980). Moreno (1942) noted that most children enter their first peer group in preschool. Thus, the earliest relationships for many children form in preschool classroooms.

Although information concerning children's conceptualizations of relationships has been obtained through interviews (Hayes, 1978; Hayes, Gersham, & Bolin, 1980; Smollar & Youniss, 1982) it has been argued recently that much more will be revealed about the nature of preschoolers' relationships through careful analysis of children's conversations (Berndt, in press). In one study, Gottman (1983) compared conversations of friend pairs to those of stranger pairs. In a second study, conversations from pairs of newly acquainted peers were collected on three occasions over a 6 week period. Based on post hoc analyses of the conversations, Gottman proposed a model of the acquaintanceship process. Pairs of children who got along well were characterized by the ability to resolve disagreements successfully, and by engagement in social comparison, self-disclosure and elaborate fantasy play. To date there has been no independent replication of this model.

Recent studies in preschools have focused on descriptions of patterns of relationships within the group. Howes (1983)

noted that preschoolers tend to have several "sporadic" friendships throughout the year. A child tends to have a stable partner for a few months and then moves on to a new partner. Hinde, (Hinde, Titmus, Easton, & Tamplin, 1985) however, found that at any one point in time, for each preschooler, the strongest associate, and a set of other strong associates could be identified. Children interacted most often with the strongest associate, and collectively more often with the associates than the nonassociates. LaGaipa (1977) has argued that relationships are multidimensional, and that levels of association can be distinguished according to best friends, close friends, good friends, social acquaintances, and casual acquaintances. Adults reported differentiating their behavior according to the context of the relationship (LaGaipa, 1977). Raupp (1982, 1983) suggested that children's relationships can be categorized as follows: mutual friends, one-sided friends, mixed friends and acquaintances.

One might expect children, as well as adults, to behave differently towards others, depending on the context of the relationship. Friendship may provide a context in which children experiment with, practice and refine social skills (Howes, 1983; Rubenstein, 1984). Asher (1983) suggests that children with friends have a "process view" of relationships. These children understand that certain strategies are needed to successfully establish and maintain relationships and they

selectively engage in such strategies when interacting with certain others. Demonstrating that children do indeed have a "process view" will dispel the notion that preschoolers simply have "momentary" conceptualization of friendships (Selman & Jacquette, 1978). That is, Selman suggested, young children do not have a clear conception of enduring relationships and they view all relationships only as existing for as long as the present interaction continues.

To show that children do have a "process view" of relationships, resulting in differential behavior towards partners depending on the context of the relationship, a within-subjects design is needed. In the present study, a within-subjects design was used to compare target children's behavior towards a best friend, associates and acquaintances in established preschool classes. Little is known about types of behavior that distinguish among levels of association (Berndt, in press). However, following from Gottman's (1983) model, social comparison, self-disclosure, fantasy play, and extent of disagreements were expected to be key behaviors. Conversations were analyzed to explore differences in these behaviors across the types of relationships.

Only children with an identifiable best friend, based on convergent sources of information (see Howes, 1983; Raupp, 1982, 1983) were selected to ensure that all of the targets were capable of engaging in these social behaviors. For each

target child a set of associates, consisting of peers the target was likely to interact with, was also defined, using the method most often used in the sociological literature (see Hansel, 1985). The method from sociological literature was used because associative networks have been studied more extensively by sociologists than psychologists. The targets' acquaintances consisted of children who did not prefer, and were not preferred by, the target and his or her best friend. Each target's behavior was summarized for behavior towards the best friend, set of associates (see Hinde et al. 1985), and the set of acquaintances and compared across the three relationship types.

Method

Subjects

Children in eight established classes from two preschools participated in this study (N = 143). Seven classes met for half a day, two or three days a week. One class met for the full day, five days a week. Mean class size was 17.9 children (range = 14 to 22). Mean age was 53.9 months (range = 44.6 to 61.0).

Design

Each target child selected had a best friend who was not another target child. Comparisons of each target's behavior towards the best friend, associates and acquaintances were made using a within-subjects design. The scores for each measure were summarized separately for each target's behavior towards

the best friend (N =1), the set of associates (N =2-7, average = 4.1), and the set of aquaintances (N = 7-17, average = 13.6). Out of each target's total behavior with members of each of these relationship types, the percentage of behavior in each behavioral category (described below) was computed. Nine of the targets were female, 13 were male. Ninety-one percent of the best friends, 85% of the associates, and 44% of the aquaintances were the same sex as the target. Analyses of sex differences were not made in this study because previous studies have found that relationship differences are not qualified by sex differences (Gottman, 1983).

Procedure

Selection of best friends, associates and acquaintances. In order to select best friend dyads convergent reports from parents (Gottman, 1983), teachers (Howes, 1983) and children (Masters & Furman, 1981) were used. Parents and teachers filled out questionnaires concerning children's friends. Children nominated their three best friends using a picture sociometric technique (McCandless & Marshall, 1957). In order to be certain that the best friend dyads involved stable, salient relationships the dyads selected met the following conservative set of criteria: a) the children in the dyad reciprocally chose each other as friends on the sociometric task, and b) the teacher indicated that the children in the dyad were friends, and c) parents of at least

one of the children in the dyad indicated that they were friends.[1] Twenty-two best friend dyads in 7 classes, with from 1 to 5 dyads per class, were identified. One child was randomly selected from each dyad to serve as the target child.

Following from traditional social network analysis (see Hansel, 1985), the target's set of associates included: all reciprocal and unilateral choices given by and given to the target; and all reciprocal choices of the best friend. All of the target's other classmates comprised the set of acquaintances.

Observations. Each target was observed interacting with peers during free-play, for three 5-minute periods on each day. Observations were collected once a week, for 6 weeks, resulting in 90 minutes of observation per target child. Observations were recorded using a portable videotape unit and a camera equipped with a special lens that allowed for unobtrusive observation. A mirror was fitted over the lens, so that the camera could be pointed away from the target while recording the child's interactions (see Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1971 for a complete description).

Measures.[2] We used a 15-second time-sampling procedure to code for interaction. Coders reviewed the videotapes, and for each interval, indicated whether or not the target child was interacting, and recorded with whom the target was

interacting. Interaction included any of the following behaviors: verbal exchange, attempts to communicate, engaged listening, joint activity and physical interaction.

For each 15-second interval in which interaction had occured, a written transcript was made, which included: the names of the children interacting, verbatim conversations, and a description of the ongoing activity. Coders reviewed the transcripts, and again using a 15-second time interval, coded for occurrence of fantasy play. Fantasy play included discussion concerning coordination of role play, and/or all actions and dialogue in role play.

Subsequent measures were directly tied to the conversations. Therefore, they were determined by using the verbal exchange as the basis for measurement. These measures were determined by using a procedure based on one used by Gottman (1983). Before coding for the following measures, all conversations were first divided into thought "units". We operationally defined a unit as any utterance, or group of utterances, contributed by one child, that expressed a single thought or idea. Two coders divided transcripts into units and a third coder checked agreement against each of these coders.

Self-disclosure included units that reflected exchanges or discussions of behaviors typical of intimate others as indicated in previous studies (Furman & Bierman, 1983; Gottman, 1983; Jourard & Resnick, 1970). Examples of self-disclosure

included: expressions of amity, affirmation of the relationship, evaluation of others and sharing of personal information. An episode of self-disclosure between the target and a peer consisted of successive units contributed by those two children involving a topic of self-disclosure.

On each transcript, every unit was coded as either an agreement or a disagreement. Each coder began by isolating on the transcript episodes of sequential conversation involving the same group of children. Information concerning when each child entered and/or left conversations was provided on the transcript. These episodes were divided into conflictual (characterized by disagreement, noncompliance, aggression) and non-conflictual (characterized by discussion, compliance, cooperation). Coders determined which children sided with and which sided against the target in conflictual episodes. Agreements between the target and a peer included all units in non-conflictual episodes involving those two children and all units from conflictual episodes in which the peer sided with the target. Disagreements included all units from conflictual episodes in which the peer sided against the target.

Social comparison included expressions of being similar to or different from another child. An episode of social comparison included all successive units exchanged between the target and a peer in which such a comparison was made.

A team of 13 coders coded for the various measures. Coder agreement was checked on 25% of the observations. For most measures, median level of agreement was computed across transcripts after calculating agreement on each transcript using the formula: agreements divided by agreements plus disagreements, multiplied by 100 (median level: units = 99.5%, interaction = 95%; fantasy play = 95%, units = 99.5%, agreements and disagreements = 95%). A Kappa coefficient was used to compute coder agreement on the other two measures (self-disclosure = .80, social comparison = .96).

Results

Because percentages were used an arcsine transformation was done in order to stabilze the variances before conducting the analyses (Alder & Roessler, 1972). Note that raw percentages are reported in Table 1. A one-way repeated measures MANOVA was conducted, followed by univariate repeated measures ANOVAS on each dependent variable (Hertzog & Rovine, 1985). When significant main effects were found post-hoc comparisons among group means using a Newman-Keuls test adjusted for repeated measures designs were conducted at the .05 level (Keppel, 1973).

Each of the target's behaviors towards the best friend, associates and acquaintances was summarized separately and compared across the three relationship types. The mean percentage of the targets' total behavior towards the best

friend, associates and acquaintances in each behavioral category is presented in Table 1. Results of the repeated measures MANOVA indicated that the omnibus F was significant ($F(2, 20) = 35.44$, $p. < .001$). Each measure is discussed separately below.

Insert Table 1 Here

During any given observation, a child interacted with an average of 3.4 children. A main effect of relationship type on amount of interaction was found ($F(2,21) = 57.87$, $p. < .001$). Post hoc comparisons indicated that best friends differed significantly from associates and from acquaintances and associates differed significantly from acquaintances. Thus, when interacting with children, targets interacted more often with best friends than with associates and more often with associates than with acquaintances. In addition, it was found that all of the targets interacted with their best friend at least once. On the average, each target interacted with 96% of the associates and 82% of the acquaintances. Thus, children's stated preferences for each other are manifested in differential interaction with those other children.

A main effect of relationship type on percentage of fantasy play engaged in was also found ($F(2,21) = 4.75$, $p. = .013$). Best friends and associates did not differ

significantly from each other, but best friends differed significantly from acquaintances, and the difference between associates and acquaintances just reached significance. Thus, when interacting with children, targets engaged in a greater percentage of fantasy play with best friends and associates than with acquaintances. Also, 82% of the targets engaged in fantasy play with their best friends. On the average a target child engaged in fantasy play with 62% of the associates and 36% of the acquaintances. Thus, fantasy play is not exclusive to best friend relationships, but is engaged in with both best friends and associates.

Self-disclosure accounted for a small percentage of units on each transcript (an average of 10.5% of units). However, some form of self-disclosure occurred on the majority (71%) of the transcripts. Thus, although these exchanges were brief, they were highly likely to occur whenever the children were interacting. A main effect for relationship type on percentage of self-disclosure was obtained ($F(2,21) = 8.08$, $p. < .001$). The post-hoc comparisons indicated that children engaged in a higher percentage of self-disclosure when interacting with best friends than with associates and acquaintances, and also that the difference between associates and acquaintances was significant. Further, all of the targets engaged in self-disclosure with a best friend. On the average each target engaged in self-disclosure with 83% of the associates and 68%

of the acquaintances. Thus, self-disclosure increases with increasing levels of association.

Across all children, it was found that interaction was predominantly characterized by agreements (82.8% of units) rather than disagreements. Comparison of targets' interactions with children from the different relationship types revealed no significant differences on agreement and disagreement measures. A trend ($F(2,21) = 2.84$, p, $= .068$) indicated a smaller percentage of disagreement units exchanged between best friends than between associates or acquaintances. It may be argued that the pool of acquaintances included "enemies" of the targets, possibly resulting in the higher percentage of disagreements between the targets and acquaintances. It should be pointed out that only a small percentage of acquaintances (6.8%) disagreed with the targets on all occasions of interaction. Also, bear in mind that for most targets, there were several acquaintances never interacted with. It is equally plausible that these children were "enemies" of the target and therefore avoided.

Within these groups of preschoolers social comparison as defined rarely occurred. Social comparison episodes occurred on only 29.7% of the transcripts. Across these transcripts, only an average of 3% of the units per transcript were coded as social comparison units. Significant differences

among the groups were not found. However, it was found that, 72% of the targets engaged in social comparison with the best friend. On the average, each target engaged in social comparison with 40% of the associates and 27% of the acquaintances. Thus, the children were least likely to compare themselves to acquaintances.

Discussion

This study revealed that preschoolers are involved in various types of relationships, and that they differentiate their behavior according to the nature of the relationship. As Hinde et al. (1985) found, preschoolers interact most often with the best friend, and more often with associates than with acquaintances. In addition, the nature of the interaction varied depending on the context of the relationship along behaviors suggested by Gottman (1983). With increasing level of association, percentage of self-disclosure conversation units increased, while percentage of disagreement conversation units decreased. Fantasy play was engaged in with best friends and associates, but rarely with acquaintances. Differentation of behavior across relationship types supports Asher's (1983) argument that children have a "process view" of relationships. That is, the findings demonstrate that preschoolers selectively engage in relationship-enhancing behaviors when interacting with best friends, and to a lesser, but significant degree, with associates. Thus, to some extent, chidren expect certain

relationships to exist over time. Within those relationships they behave in ways so as to maintain the relationships. In other relationships, such as with acquaintances, such behaviors are not exercised.

In order to maintain interaction, partners must be able to resolve disagreements successfully (Gottman, 1983). In these preschool classes, it was found, as has been in other studies, (Dawe, 1934; Hay and Ross, 1982) that disagreements are the exception rather than the rule. It may be that in regularly meeting groups, children must learn to get along to some extent so that the group may function as a unit. Nevertheless, best friends and associates devoted less of their conversations to disagreements than acquaintances. They resolved their disagreements and continued with harmonious play. Resolution strategies were not analyzed in this study. However, Sackin and Thelen (1984) found that preschoolers tend to use two types of strategies: yield, which most often results in non-peaceful outcomes, and conciliatory gestures, which most often result in peaceful outcomes. It can be expected that best friends and associates would be more likely to use conciliatory gestures than acquaintances. Follow-up detailed analyses of resolution strategies are needed to support this expectation. Such findings would also be consistent with Selman's (1981) argument that children do not use their highest level of interpersonal reasoning in all conflictual situations, but that within

friendships the highest levels would be expected to be used.

Fantasy play was engaged in equally often with best friends and associates. In preschool classes fantasy play most often involves group play (Doyle, 1982). As Gottman (1983) noted, fantasy play becomes more elaborate and spontaneous over time. To carry out fantasy play smoothly, partners highly familiar with each other, such as close associates, are needed. The partners must interpret cues correctly, understand the other's role and anticipate the next move. Thus, acquaintances, who are not familiar with the target's style and idiosyncrasies, are rarely successfully integrated into the fantasy play.

As with adults (Duck, 1973), self-disclosure also plays a role in maintaining children's relationships. Children engage in the most self-disclosure with those they most often interact with. Perhaps relationships with best friends and associates provide secure contexts within which feelings and opinions can be expressed. Self-disclosure rarely occurred in the form of simple social comparison. Perhaps this finding is due to the fact that all of the children had known each other for quite some time. Simple social comparison occurs most often during early stages of relationships. Self-disclosure had advanced to more involved discussions of feelings and opinions. It could also be argued that perhaps any social comparison that did occur was covert rather than overt.

This study makes two major, unique contributions to the literature on peer relationships. Firstly, a within-subjects design was used, controlling for the social competence of the target across all relationship types. Secondly, every target was very familiar with all the classmates, so familiarity was not confounded with relationship type. These control procedures allow for the unequivocal assertion that the behavioral differentiation found was due to relationship type and not some other factor. This finding does not imply that preschoolers have a "metacognitive" awareness of the strategies used. Indeed, studies based on interviews with preschoolers indicate that children may have difficulty articulating their conceptualizations and strategies (Selman, 1981). Findings from the present study highlight the fact that in everyday interactions strategies guide behavior, resulting in differentiation of behavior depending on the type of relationship of the partners involved.

Studying networks of association, rather than just individual dyads, can also yield information about patterns of association in children's groups. Howes (1983) found that toddlers and developmentally delayed preschoolers tend to have one stable, exclusive friendship throughout the course of the year. Normal preschoolers tend to be involved in several relationships. She suggested that for toddlers, friendship plays a role in providing emotional security. For

preschoolers, who have practiced social behavior and gained confidence within an earlier stable relationship, social skills are generalized to several new relationships.

Thus, one would expect widening social networks within preschool classes. Indeed, it has been suggested that social adjustment in the preschool may be related to the ability to maintain specific relationhips simultaneously (Ladd, 1983; Masters & Furman, 1981). Having only a best friend and no, or few associates may be a matter of preference, or it may be an indication of emotional immaturity. Moreno (1942) expressed concern over isolated and exclusive dyads in the preschool. Dodge (1983) found that negelected preschoolers may be able to engage in certain social skills, but they have difficulty generalizing them to new relationships. These findings suggest that preschoolers with few associates may not need training in social skills. Instead, the clinician's task may be to build self-confidence and to teach children how to generalize skills to new relationships. Further study of children's associative networks may not only provide more information on normative patterns of relationships, but on individual differences in these patterns as well.

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Footnotes

[1]Twenty-nine dyads met this set of criteria. Three were dropped because one of the partners left the school. Three dyads in one class involved the same three children. Highest choice on the sociometric was used to select one dyad from these three. The same method was used in a second class in which one child was involved in two such dyads. However, one child in another class was involved in two such dyads with no greater preference expressed on the sociometric task. Therefore, one dyad was randomly chosen as a best friend dyad. The other partners were consdiered to be associates. This decision was conservative with respect to the design of the study. It did not favor support of the original purpose proposed, in that potential "best friends" were included as associates, possibly making the set of associates more like the best friends.

[2]Because the coding procedures for the measures are quite extensive they are reviewed briefly here. A complete coding manual can be obtained by writing to the author.

Table 1

Mean Percentage of Targets' Behavior Towards Best Friends, Associates, and Acquaintances Coded as Each Category of Behavior

	Best Friend		Associates		Acquaintances		p.<
	M	(s.d.)	M	(s.d.)	M	(s.d.)	
Overall Interaction[a]	40.5	(15.8)	15.1	(6.7)	5.4	(3.3)	.001
Fantasy[a]	20.1	(15.4)	14.6	(12.9)	11.1	(11.1)	.013
Self-Disclosure[b]	14.1	(9.8)	11.6	(6.0)	9.2	(10.0)	.001
Agreements[b]	86.6	(8.8)	83.8	(12.0)	78.2	(15.8)	ns.
Disagreements[b]	13.1	(11.1)	19.1	(13.7)	23.8	(15.8)	.068
Social Comparison[b]	2.8	(3.4)	9.5	(15.6)	1.8	(2.0)	ns.

a. Percentage of intervals

b. Percentage of conversation units